ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 27

THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY
January 1982

THE KENNEDY IMPRISO

1. THE PRISONER OF CHARIS

BY GARRY WILLS

PRESIDENT EISENHOWER'S CRIME, IN THE EYES OF many of his critics, was a government by committee. Committees are not creative. They stifle originality, impose conformity. Eisenhower had let problems go untended in order to preserve the country's (and his own) tranquillity. An "existential" leader, as Norman Mailer put it, would dare to go outside channels, to confront the unexpected with a resourceful poise of improvisation.

Arthur Schlesinger and Theodore Sorensen, official historians of John F. Kennedy's presidency, portray their leader as just the "existential" hero Mailer pined for. His first job was to dismantle the protective procedures Eisenhower had woven around the presidency. Kennedy wanted to be exposed, not shielded—out on the battlements, scanning all horizons, not seated in his chamber sifting documents. His ideal was the Franklin Roosevelt celebrated by Schlesinger and Richard Neustadt. Neustadt's 1960 book, *Presidential Power*, became the "hot" item of the transition. In it, Roosevelt and Eisenhower were presented in sharp contrast—Roosevelt as a man free from procedural entanglements, Eisenhower as the slave of them. Kennedy, to imitate Roosevelt, had to become a sort of Eisenhower in reverse.

* * * * * *

FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT HIMSELF COULD NOT HAVE been a post-Rooseveltian President. Those who wanted to apply his techniques to a world that those techniques had shaped were mistaking their own and Roosevelt's historic moments. Neustadt tried to teach Kennedy how Roosevelt had circumvented the bureaucracy. But Roosevelt did not circumvent the bureaucracy; he invented it in the first place.

Presidents since Kennedy have conceived their task as a David-and-Goliath struggle with the vast machinery of government. Control of all those cogs and wheels is impossible—they would just chew up the President. So a series of raids from the outside is called for, hit-and-run tactics, guerrilla government. But Roosevelt had been Goliath, not David, proliferating agencies outward from him, not sending raiders against them. The initiator of programs is not a prisoner of their past record, of precedent and procedure. He controls them by setting their goals, choosing their first personnel, presiding over their authorization. All new systems have energy and focus, from the very effort that brought them into being.

The very pr
state and warf
not have to indu
cepted. The Depression was real enough; Congress begged the President for *more* bills during the busy first three months of his administration. People yearned for him to do something, anything, to meet the crisis—and the demands of that crisis, rather than any ideological program, dictated what measures he took. Some of these were makeshift, some mistaken, some illegal; but all were aimed, supported, desired. Spontaneity and resourcefulness were given a free hand—but only to create measures soon translated into programs with set procedures.

There was the same virtue of definition in war measures. Roosevelt was free to override not only ordinary procedures but basic rights. The public supported the most irregular means of guaranteeing national security—a secret decision like that to build nuclear weapons, or an arbitrary punishment like the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans, or unilateral fiat like the demand for unconditional surrender. The Manhattan Project was a spectacular success because, in time of peril, the President could commandeer men and talent, site and materials; he could assign tasks, cloak the whole matter in secrecy, and use the weapons without consulting the citizenry. In all these ways, war gave Roosevelt quasi-dictatorial powers—powers most Americans would shudder to see granted in peacetime. After the war, the spontaneous and arbitrary yielded to settled ways again. Security procedures, for instance, may have been unfair after the war, but they were not arbitrary and secret—Congress reviewed and regularized them. If agencies created in wartime were to justify their continued existence, they had to do so by standards different from those applied at their inception. The one great exception was the CIA, whose funding was kept unconstitutionally secret, and whose mandate had a wartime character. It is no accident that the presidential itch to use charismatic power to overthrow foreign governments, or spy on Americans, or come up with criminal weapons, found its readiest outlet in the CIA's activities.

CONTINUED